PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 21 Number 3 March 2024

FIELD TRIP-1: Sunday, 3rd March 2024, 6.15AM: Kistareddypet Lake, Hyderabad. Meeting Point(s): SVM Grand, Miyapur, 05:20AM; BHEL Bus Stop, Lingampally, 05:45AM. Trip Coordinator(s): Adnan Uddin (Mobile: 95337-01702)

Kistareddypet Lake, located near Patancheru, has recently caught the attention of birders. The lake is home to more than 110 species of birds, including large flocks of Little Stint, Black-winged Stilt, Black-tailed Godwit, Garganey, Gadwall etc. One can also spot Ruff, Spot-billed Pelican, Common Snipe, Greater Flamingo, Common Redshank, Temminck's Stint and other shore birds. The surrounding areas also host species like Mongolian Short-toed Lark, Citrine Wagtail, Baya Weaver, Indian Golden Oriole etc. This is a great opportunity to observe and record the diversity of migratory waterbirds and shore birds in this important habitat as winter draws to a close in the state.

FIELD TRIP-2: Sunday, 17th March 2024, 6.15AM: Mokila. Meeting Point: Morine Bakery, Narsingi, 5.30AM. Trip Coordinator(s): Gokul Krishna Addanki (Mobile: 99453-46585)

Mokila is a dry-deciduous scrub habitat which holds rich birding. So please come and enjoy a Sunday outing, watch some lovely birds and spend some time out in nature. Some common species found in this area: Eurasian Collared Dove, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Small Minivet, Bay-backed Shrike, Siberian Stonechat, Eurasian Hoopoe, Wire-tailed Swallow and many more.

Both trips will be half-day trips, so carry adequate water and breakfast/snacks, and protective gear if required. Covid protocols will be followed; please ensure you wear masks, carry a sanitiser and maintain social distancing. Non-members are most welcome; however, they are requested to contribute Rs. 100/- per person to the Deccan Birders kitty. New Deccan Birders hats and caps will be available for purchase; please carry adequate cash.

BIRDING AT MAHANANDA WLS & SENCHAL FOREST, WEST BENGAL
Trip Report: October 5-8, 2023

Text & Photos: Sita Susarla

Grey-sided Laughingthrush flock

The Rufous-necked Hornbill, Jerdon's Baza, Black Baza and other eastern Himalayan birds are some of the major attractions of Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary (MWS). The sanctuary is at the foothills of the Himalayas in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, and is flanked by the Teesta river in the East and the Mahananda river in the west. The forest type in the sanctuary is characterized by riverine vegetation at the foothills and mixed wet broadleaf type in the higher altitudes of Latpanchar. Due to the variations in elevation and forest type, the sanctuary is home to a large number of bird species.

Our guide arranged a three-day homestay at Latpanchar and from here we made tours of Senchal Forest, Bagora, Upper Sittong, Rongtong and Shivkhola.

On the first day, we drove from Bagdogra airport to Latpanchar via Rongtong and Shivkhola forest. Though there is a shorter route to Latpanchar the guide took us through Rongtong and Shivkhola, because that is where there was maximum probability of finding the Jerdon's Baza and the Black Baza. We passed through several tea gardens along the way and, after a brief halt at Rongtong Café for lunch, we started to watch birds *en route*.

Rongtong, meaning 'colours and beyond', is an ideal place for bird watching. Here we saw Himalayan Bulbul, Spangled Drongo, Black-crested Bulbul, Scarlet Minivet, Grey-backed Shrike, Blue-throated Barbet, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, Olive-backed Pipits and the ubiquitous Malayan Giant Squirrel.

Malayan Giant Squirrel

With no trace of the Bazas, we moved on to Shivkhola, which is about seven kilometres from Rongtong. Shivkhola is the name of the stream that houses an ancient Shiva temple on its banks. It is a picturesque location and destination for spotting many birds that are endemic to North Bengal.

Maroon Oriole

The Maroon Oriole was the first bird that we sighted here. It belongs to a clade of red and black orioles and is known to build its nest with bast-fibre and cobwebs.

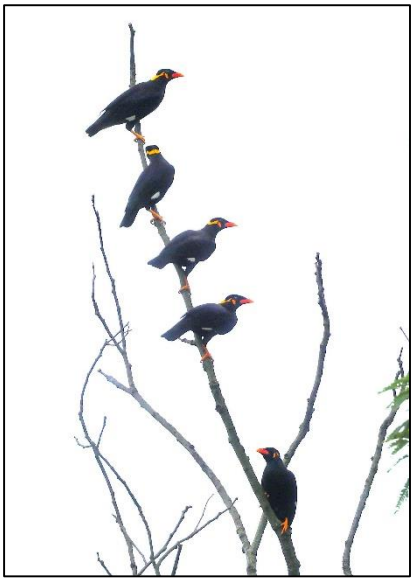
Collared Falconet

Very close to the Oriole was a pair of Collared Falconets perched at the edge of a leafless branch. True to their name, they looked like miniature Falcons, but their foraging behavior is similar to those of Flycatchers as they would make brief forays from the branch and return back.

Pin-tailed Green Pigeon

As we observed them, a flock of about fifteen Large Woodshrikes came along and settled around a Large Cuckooshrike. We also noticed a flock of Pin-tailed Green Pigeons on one of the trees. All this, while our guide was scanning the skies for the Bazas with no luck.

Green-billed Malkoha



Common Hill Myna

As we drove along, the daylight began to fade and the Hill Mynas came in small flocks and began to settle on their roosting trees. A Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon, Green-tailed Sunbirds, a Himalayan Cuckoo and several Pied Hornbills were the last on our list for the day.

Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon

Himalayan Cuckoo

The drive was a fascinating experience with no dearth of scenic viewpoints and bird watching points. As the sun began to set, we started off to Latpanchar. It is the highest point of Mahananda Sanctuary and also densely covered with pine, teak, *sal* and cinchona. It is home to the Rufous-necked Hornbill, Red-headed Trogon, Long-tailed Broadbill and Common Green Magpie.

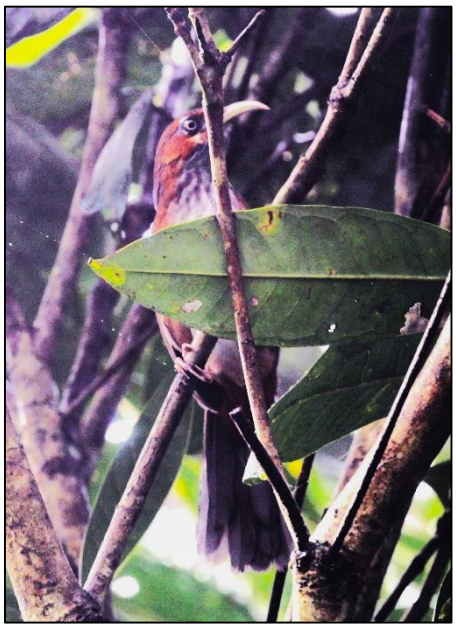
Long-tailed Broadbill

We spent the whole of Day-2 at Latpanchar looking for the aforesaid birds. While the morning session saw us through most of the targeted birds, it was not until late afternoon that we could sight the Hornbill, and that too only one female bird. It was a beautiful bird though and the bill distinctly marked with dark ridges looked as if it was painted.

Rufous-necked Hornbill female

Another interesting factor of Latpanchar is that it is home to a large number of butterflies of different hues and colours, suggesting a very clean environment. There were nearly 25 species of butterflies that were new to us and it was enriching to see these beautiful insects. The day was thus doubly fruitful for us.

On Day-3, our plan was to watch birds of Upper Sittong, Senchal and Bagora. At Upper Sittong, there were flocks of Striated Bulbuls, assorted Laughingthrushes, Fire-tailed and Green-tailed Sunbirds, Red-billed Leiothrix, White-tailed Nuthatch, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler and Wedge-tailed Green Pigeons.



Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler

At Senchal, we stopped at the entrance of Tiger Hill, where there were two bird feeding points. Very soon after we arrived, Grey-sided Laughingthrush, White-throated Laughingthrush and Scaly Laughingthrushes came to feed on the grain.

Scaly Laughingthrush

After about an hour or so, two pairs of Hill Partridges stopped at the feed. The Hill Partridge, also known as Common Hill Partridge or Necklaced Hill Partridge, belongs to the pheasant family and the male wears an orange cap and sports distinct markings on its body.

Hill Partridge

After a break for tea and snacks, we moved on to the Senchal general area. This is an interesting habitat with different kinds of shrubs and bushes. We found that this place was teeming with birds. Fortunately, we had extra battery packs, otherwise we would have definitely fallen short of some good pictures.

Spotted Laughingthrush

White-browed Fulvetta

Black-throated Parrotbill

In an hour and a half within the open land, we saw Spotted Laughingthrush, White-browed Fulvetta, Black-throated Parrotbill, Aberrant Bush Warbler, Buff-barred Warbler, Lemon-rumped Warbler, Common Rosefinch, Grey Bushchat and Siberian Stonechat, among others.

Aberrant Bush Warbler

The Warblers were on almost every other bush and were not shy of posing for photos. The Parrotbills and Fulvettas on the other hand remained inside the bushes most of the time. As the name suggests, the Parrotbill has a robust bill, like that of a parakeet, and belongs to the family of Paradoxornithidae of passerine birds. We could not sight the Brown and Great Parrotbills despite hearing their calls now and then.

Our next stop was at the Bagora Forest that is situated near Kurseong at a height of 7150 feet. It was an uphill road meandering through Pine, Oak and Fir trees with the sunrays filtering through them. The time was around four in the evening when we reached Bagora and the air was filled with roosting calls.

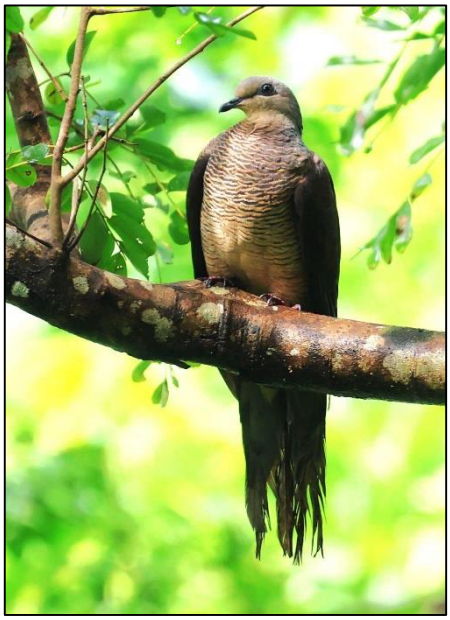
Chestnut-tailed Minla

Rufous-capped Babbler

Amidst the cacophony, we spotted Yellow-bellied Fantail, White-throated Fantail, Chestnut-tailed Minla, Rufous-capped Babbler, Black-throated Tit, Great Barbets, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher and Common Iora.

The dark cloudy weather and drizzling made us wind up for the day.

For the next day, our guide made a plan to drive us through Rongtong and Shivkhola before dropping us at the airport. This way we would get sufficient time to look for the Bazas once again.



Barred Cuckoo Dove

We started off at around 7:30AM and, on the way to Shivkhola, we spotted Barred Cuckoo Dove, Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker, Greater Flameback, Lesser Yellownape, Rufous Sibia and Dollarbird.

At this point we received information that Jerdon's Bazas were around. On reaching the location we spotted three Jerdon's Bazas!

Jerdon's Baza

The Jerdon's Baza is a brown hawk with a thin white-tipped black crest, usually held erect. It inhabits foothills of Eastern Himalayas and except for the erect crest it resembles the Changeable Hawk Eagle.

Just as we finished observing the Jerdon's Baza, our guide got a call from his fellow guide about the whereabouts of Black Bazas. We were excited about the news but what awaited us was beyond our expectations!

Black Baza

It was a spectacular sighting of 15 to 20 Black Bazas circling in the sky – presumably in preparation to migrate to their wintering grounds in the Southern part of the country. Now and then they would descend in twos and threes to indulge in active feeding before their long journey.

We had tried to see them in their wintering grounds down South without much success and little did we know that we would see so many of them in Mahananda. We watched them to our hearts' content and could also get some satisfactory pictures of them.

Black-winged Cuckooshrike

Asian Fairy Bluebird

At Rongtong we halted for about half an hour to try and see if we could spot some more birds. Once again it was a fruitful halt. There was the Sultan Tit, Black-winged Cuckooshrike, Asian Fairy Bluebird, Great Hornbill and Crested Serpent Eagle.

Great Hornbill

Orange-bellied Leafbird

This was a wonderful birding tour and we could see many new birds. As per our guide, two more trips in spring and winter seasons would be required to cover most of the species in this region of North Bengal. With 32 lifers in the list and wonderful sightings of the Bazas and Rufous-necked Hornbill, and many more birds to still watch, we decided to visit North Bengal once again soon.

The full list of birds seen during the trip:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Hill Partridge	*Arborophila torqueola*	46	White-throated Fantail	*Rhipidura albicollis*
2	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	47	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
3	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	48	Ashy Drongo	*Dicrurus leucophaeus*
4	Oriental Turtle Dove	*Streptopelia orientalis*	49	Hair-crested Drongo	*Dicrurus hottentottus*
5	Spotted Dove	*Stigmatopelia orientalis*	50	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	*Dicrurus paradiseus*
6	Barred Cuckoo Dove	*Macropygia unchall*	51	Grey-backed Shrike	*Lanius tephronotus*
7	Pin-tailed Green Pigeon	*Treron apicauda*	52	Common Green Magpie	*Cissa chinensis*
8	Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon	*Treron sphenurus*	53	Grey Treepie	*Dendrocitta formosae*
9	Greater Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*	54	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
10	Green-billed Malkoha	*Rhopodytes tristis*	55	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*
11	Himalayan Cuckoo	*Cuculus saturatus*	56	Yellow-bellied Fantail	*Chelidorhynx hypoxantha*
12	Himalayan Swiftlet	*Collocalia brevirostris*	57	Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher	*Culicicapa ceylonensis*
13	Eastern Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	58	Sultan Tit	*Melanochloro sultanea*
14	Jerdon's Baza	*Aviceda jerdoni*	59	Green-backed Tit	*Parus monticolus*
15	Black Baza	*Aviceda leuphotes*	60	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*
16	Crested Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis cheela*	61	Red-rumped Swallow	*Cecropis daurica*
17	Mountain Hawk Eagle	*Nisaetus nipalensis*	62	Striated Bulbul	*Pycnonotus striatus*
18	Black Eagle	*Ictinaetus malayensis*	63	Black-crested Bulbul	*Pycnonotus (melanicterus) flaviventris*
19	Asian Barred Owlet	*Glaucidium cuculoides*	64	Himalayan Bulbul	*Pycnonotus leucogenys*
20	Great Hornbill	*Buceros bicornis*	65	Buff-barred Warbler	*Phylloscopus pulcher*
21	Oriental Pied Hornbill	*Anthracoceros albirostris*	66	Lemon-rumped Warbler	*Phylloscopus chloronotus*
22	Rufous-necked Hornbill	*Aceros nipalensis*	67	Grey-hooded Warbler	*Phylloscopus xanthoschistos*
23	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	*Merops philippinus*	68	Aberrant Bush Warbler	*Cettia flavolivacea*
24	Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	*Merops leschenaulti*	69	Black-throated Tit	*Aegithalos concinnus*
25	Dollarbird	*Eurystomus orientalis*	70	White-browed Fulvetta	*Fulvetta vinipectus*
26	Great Barbet	*Psilopogon virens*	71	Black-throated Parrotbill	*Suthora nipalensis*
27	Blue-throated Barbet	*Psilopogon asiaticus*	72	Rufous-capped Babbler	*Cyanoderma ruficeps*
28	Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	*Dendrocopos canicapillus*	73	Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler	*Pomatorhinus erythrogenys*
29	Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker	*Dendrocopos macei*	74	Scaly Laughingthrush	*Garrulax subunicolor*
30	Greater Flameback	*Chrysocolaptes lucidus*	75	Streaked Laughingthrush	*Garrulax lineatus*
31	Lesser Yellownape	*Picus chlorolophus*	76	Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush	*Trochalopteron erythrocephalum*
32	Grey-headed Woodpecker	*Picus canus*	77	Rufous Sibia	*Malacias capistratus*
33	Greater Yellownape	*Chrysophlegma flavinucha*	78	Chestnut-tailed Minla	*Actinodura strigula*
34	Collared Falconet	*Microhierax caerulescens*	79	Red-billed Leiothrix	*Leiothrix lutea*
35	Eurasian Kestrel	*Falco tinnunculus*	80	White-crested Laughingthrush	*Garrulax leucolophus*
36	Long tailed Broadbill	*Psarisomus dalhousiae*	81	Spotted Laughingthrush	*Garrulax ocellatus*
37	Scarlet Minivet	*Pericrocotus speciosus*	82	White-throated Laughingthrush	*Garrulax albogularis*
38	Large Cuckooshrike	*Coracina macei*	83	Grey-sided Laughingthrush	*Pterorhinus caerulatus*
39	Black-winged Cuckooshrike	*Lalage melaschistos*	84	White-tailed Nuthatch	*Sitta himalayensis*
40	Black-naped Oriole	*Oriolus chinensis*	85	Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch	*Sitta cinnamoventris*
41	Black-hooded Oriole	*Oriolus xanthornus*	86	Common Hill Myna	*Gracula religiosa*
42	Maroon Oriole	*Oriolus traillii*	87	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
43	Large Woodshrike	*Tephrodornis virgatus*	88	Dark-sided Flycatcher	*Muscicapa sibirica*
44	Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike	*Hemipus picatus*	89	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*
45	Common Iora	*Aegithina tiphia*	90	Verditer Flycatcher	*Eumyias thalassinus*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
91	Taiga Flycatcher	*Ficedula albicilla*	99	Golden-fronted Leafbird	*Chloropsis aurifrons*
92	Black Redstart	*Phoenicurus ochruros*	100	Orange-bellied Leafbird	*Chloropsis hardwickii*
93	Blue-capped Rock Thrush	*Monticola cinclorhyncha*	101	Grey Wagtail	*Motacilla cinerea*
94	Siberian Stonechat	*Saxicola maurus*	102	Forest Wagtail	*Dendronanthus indicus*
95	Grey Bushchat	*Saxicola ferreus*	103	Olive-backed Pipit	*Anthus hodgsoni*
96	Fire-tailed Sunbird	*Aethopyga ignicauda*	104	Common Rosefinch	*Carpodacus erythrinus*
97	Green-tailed Sunbird	*Aethopyga nipalensis*	105	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*
98	Asian Fairy Bluebird	*Irena puella*	106	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

(Received on WhatsApp, November 25, 2023)

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (*Merops persicus*)

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (Great Rann of Kutch, Gujarat, September 27, 2022)

Order: Coraciiformes
Family: Meropidae
Genus: *Merops*
Species: *M. persicus*
Size: 24-26 cm

Description & distribution: Like other Bee-eaters, the Blue-cheeked Bee-Eater is also richly coloured, predominantly green but with liberally distributed flashes of other colours. It has a black eye-stripe, starting from base of bill and going through the eye to its ear coverts; it also has a yellow chin, restricted pale chestnut throat and long, pointed black bill. The white and blue-green cheek patch is conspicuous. It is very similar to the Blue-tailed Bee-eater, but can be differentiated by its bronze-green tail, whitish forehead, and turquoise-and-white supercilium. Upperparts and underparts are green but sometimes show a turquoise wash on the belly, rump and tail coverts. The quoted size of 24-26cm does not include the two elongated central tail feathers, which can add another 7cm. The sexes are alike, but the female has shorter tail feathers.

The Blue-cheeked Bee-Eater breeds in northern Africa, and in the Middle East from eastern Turkey to Kazakhstan and, rarely in the western reaches of the Indian subcontinent. In the Indian subcontinent, it is seen in Pakistan south to Sindh, and north-western India east to Kutch, Rajasthan and Delhi. In India it is generally considered a summer visitor and passage migrant, with incoming populations arriving around April-May and returning in September-October, when they migrate to tropical Africa for the winter. Two sub-species are recognized: *M. p. persicus*, which breeds in Asia and winters in East and southern Africa, and *M. p. chrysocercus*, which breeds in North Africa and winters in western Africa.

Habitat & behaviour: The Blue-cheeked Bee-Eater is usually seen singly or in small groups, at neighborhood *jheels*, ponds, village tanks, sandy seashores, open woodland or grasslands in its wintering grounds. It seems to prefer perching on telephone wires, if available, or on bare branches at the top of bushes or scrub. Its diet consists mainly of insects like dragonflies, bees, wasps and hornets, which it catches by way of aerial sorties before gracefully circling and returning to perch, where it batters its prey to death before swallowing it. The call is a musical, somewhat interrogative *tetew*, repeated several times. The same call is also used as a contact call during night migration.

Nesting: In its breeding grounds, the Blue-cheeked Bee-Eater breeds generally between April and August. The nest is a burrow in the ground; it is a colonial breeder and several nests may be seen close together. The usual clutch consists of 4-5 white eggs. Both male and female share parental duties.

Local name: The Blue-cheeked Bee-Eater is known as *'Bada patringa'* in Hindi (a name it shares with the Blue-tailed Bee-eater), *'Bada hajamda'* in Kutchi, *'Moto patrangiyo'* in Gujarati and '*Wado traklo'* in Sindhi.

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For Private Circulation Only
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For information, write to: Deccan Birders, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. **Website:** www.deccanbirders.in. **E-group:** http://groups.google.co.in/group/deccanbirders. **Society membership** (in Rs.): Annual: 500 per annum; Student: 200 per annum; Corporate: 2000 per annum; Life: 3000. (*Add Rs 75 for outstation cheques.)*